Orthodoxy in the Postmodern Context

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I Introduction

How are we to define orthodoxy in the postmodern context? This is not only a theological but an ecclesial and socio-cultural question. Orthodoxy involves a claim to truth and ways of standing up for this truth in response to the challenges faced by that claim. In this article I discuss the Christian truth claim and its relation to our current context. This also means discussing different approaches to understanding this claim to truth in relation to various ways of analyzing the context.

Here I can consider only a few aspects of this subject.[1] I shall try to show, from a socio-cultural and philosophical viewpoint, how the often self-evident truth claim involved in the Christian use of the notion of orthodoxy is affected (or 'interrupted') by a postmodern context. I shall refer primarily to the Western-European context, although globalization and worldwide communication mean that several aspects under examination recur in other contexts. I also give a summary account of three ways of dealing with the challenge to orthodoxy.

II The postmodern context

From a socio-cultural perspective, the postmodern context in Western countries is marked, as far as religion is concerned, by secularization or detraditionalization, individualization and pluralization, which have changed the religious panorama dramatically over the years.[2] Until the mid-twentieth century, Christian religious affiliation and identity were almost self-evident in large parts of Europe. This is no longer the case. Structurally speaking, religious identity and affiliation have become much more reflexive than before, and people are now much more inclined to choose their identities, and the way in which they live their affiliations. A pluralization of religions has also occurred through migration, and as a result of worldwide communication; it is more visible than in the past.

These influences make the European context significantly post-Christian and post-secular. As with several words with the prefix 'post', this does not imply that this context is no longer marked by Christianity, or by secularization, but it does indicate that the attitude of people and society to these realities has changed significantly. Secularization, for example, has not eradicated religion. Some commentators would even argue that desecularization is a feature of our times, but add that, in Europe at least, there has been an immense change in the situation of religious institutional affiliations and identity construction.[3] Together with religious detraditionalization and individualization, religious pluralization has altered the position of religious believers and communities. Accordingly, religious identity and affiliation are no longer self-evident, but always involve a choice, at least on the structural level, which means that (from a biographical perspective) this choice can be experienced as a vocation.

The need to choose, and the recurrent question why we should choose this rather than that, result in greater potential freedom and reflexivity. The new situation also makes identity unstable, because things could have been very different, and may be different now or in the future. We have become increasingly aware that identity is always somewhat contingent, in the sense of depending on situations, available options, and peer, market and media influences. It is never acquired as such, to be owned by the one whom it constitutes. Detraditionalization, individualization and pluralization result in a profound insecurity about identity. The new situation changes the task of identity construction for individuals and communities alike. Everyone in the relevant context has to cope with this task. This includes Christians and their churches.

I would say that, from a socio-cultural perspective, the self-evident mode of individual and communal Christian identity construction is 'interrupted'. The Christian faith is no longer acquired and transmitted without question but has to face structural insecurity. How are we to deal with these new possibilities of freedom and reflexivity, and with the accompanying instability and insecurity? Does this new situation offer new opportunities to appropriate the Christian tradition and its truth claim? Or is it adverse to the truth claim and transmission of the Christian tradition, because it makes identity construction problematical by offering choices beyond the traditional options?

In certain philosophical circles, the postmodern context has been

marked by the criticism of metaphysics, of 'ontotheology', and of the 'grand narratives' (or 'metanarratives') of modernity. In the wake of Heidegger's critique of ontotheology[4], proponents of 'difference' such as Derrida and Lyotard criticized any attempt to offer all-encompassing theories of being and of history. Derrida considered any such attempt to be guilty of metaphysical violence because it was oblivious to the 'difference/ *différance*', the 'margin' and the other, which was both constitutive of our ways of dealing with being, yet escaped our attempts to cope with it.[5] Similarly, for Lyotard, postmodern criticism was directed against the modern (and postmodern) grand narratives and their indifference to the 'differend', the event, the expectation, the opening and the otherness, which allowed us to think, to write and to speak, but could never be grasped by such expressions. He saw the task of a postmodern philosopher, writer and artist as searching for ways of thinking, writing, or expressing what was at stake in the event, without laying claim to it: that is, searching for ways to bear witness to the 'differend'.[6]

Over recent decades there has been some evidence of a turn to religion among proponents of 'difference' in the phenomenological, hermeneutical and deconstructionist traditions. More specifically, religion seems to provide categories or strategies which are thought to be important for thinking and talking about what is beyond thinking and talking.[7] Of course, religion and religious language have been used primarily for strictly philosophical purposes, as offering ways to bear witness to that which is constitutive of language, but always remains 'before' or 'beyond' language (as, for instance, in Lyotard's work). Some practitioners of the theory of 'difference' considered any such endeavour to be co-terminous with the unfolding of the structure of religion itself (Derrida, J.-L. Marion, E. Levinas), and eventually this persuaded some of them to develop a kind of philosophical religiosity (J. Caputo, R. Kearney). In almost all these philosophical appeals to religion, language appeared as a contamination to be overcome in order to reach, or to hint at, a more original structure of religion ('religion without religion'). The narratives, doctrines, practices and institutions of religious traditions determined, domesticated and thus tended to obscure what was really at stake in the 'religious': the radical opening to the 'differend', to otherness, and to the event. Language was not considered as a mediating space that made religious relationships to the transcendent possible. On the contrary, language was regarded in terms of its radical failure to deal appropriately with the transcendent.

Philosophical discussions in this regard have focused on the question whether our attempts to go beyond language are ultimately futile (since we cannot escape language). The assumption that language contaminates inclined many proponents of 'difference' to develop their arguments in the form of a (philosophical) negative theology. They often did this with reference to Christian negative theologies, from which they either differentiated their own thought (Derrida, Lyotard), or which they claimed to exemplify more extensively, or fully (Marion, Levinas). Moreover, authors who have defined their approach to being Christian, or at least have developed it in conversation with the Christian tradition, have either drawn very selectively on a Christianity without incarnation (Caputo, Kearney), or have treated the Christian narrative as incurably hegemonic (Lyotard, Derrida). They may be said to have thought of real or pure religion as going beyond religion(s).

How are we to deal with such redefinitions of religion and the ensuing criticisms of the Christian religion, which affect the latter's essential truth claims, and thus radically 'interrupt' Christian self-understanding? Here again, the question is whether these philosophical approaches can contribute to a current understanding of orthodoxy, understood as the way in which Christians consider and make the Christian truth claim operational. Or are they to be seen as radically opposed to the notion of orthodoxy?

III Three theological responses

From a socio-cultural perspective, especially in consideratioin of the insecure nature of religious identity, there are challenges to the notion of orthodoxy today. It begs the question of how we can be sure about the truth which we (pro)claim. Certain philosophical critiques of religion and Christianity challenge the particularity of the truth claim involved in Christian orthodoxy, and call on us to look for the truth beyond its all-too-determining and domesticating particularity. In the following, I shall try to distinguish between three different reactions to these two 'interruptions' of the Christian truth claim. The first opposes these 'interruptions'; the second is characterized by an indiscriminate acceptance of these 'interruptions'; while the third reaction may be seen as opening itself to, yet challenging, some of their presumptions or consequences.

Suspicion is an initial reaction to the structural insecurity of religious

identity, and to philosophical criticism of the all too particular nature of Christian truth claims. This suspicion is largely a response to the Western postmodern condition characterized by a culture of secularism and pluralism, nihilism and relativism. This theological reaction sees the postmodern criticism of modernity as helpful only in revealing the false presumptions of the modern projects of auto-sufficiency and emancipation. Only a firm reaffirmation of the Christian truth claim, and its particular rationality and practices, directed against this culture, can banish that insecurity and offer a way out of the nihilism and relativism which beset the Western context because it is oblivious to its Christian roots. Here orthodoxy functions as the true counter-narrative. This position has been promoted most prominently by 'Radical Orthodoxy', a movement which appeared at the very end of the twentieth century, and which aims at 'theologically reclaiming the world again'. It maintains that the integrity of reality and the reality of truth can be ensured only from an exclusively theological perspective.[8] In Roman Catholic circles, the theology of Joseph Ratzinger from 2005 till 2013 had similar features. He vehemently criticized the widespread secularism, nihilism and relativism of the current context, which he saw as typical of radical enlightenment culture, and in contradistinction to the culture of Christian faith.[9] As in Radical Orthodoxy, Ratzinger has generally promoted a somewhat neo-Augustinian understanding of the relation between theological truth and context, which results in a profoundly dual understanding of reality. The relationship between the eternal and the temporal, the heavenly and the worldly, the Church and the world, is considered to be hierarchical and asymmetrical, and must be strictly differentiated, without confusion.[10] Orthodoxy is the remedy against the failures of the context.

This call for (radical) orthodoxy is framed in opposition to a context considered to be inimical to the Christian truth claim. The methodological starting-point is the discontinuity between Christian faith and the postmodern context. This implies that a theological dialogue with the world does not contribute intrinsically to our understanding of the Christian faith. Dialogue of this kind can serve only as an occasion for reaffirming its claims, and thus constitutes an instance of orthodoxy. By calling the world to conversion, this orthodoxy, and the Church that proclaims it, should be beacons of light and truth in a world that is going astray. Consequently, there are hardly any points of contact between faith and context, and the legitimacy of the Christian truth claim resides solely

in the Christian narrative, and in its tradition, Church and magisterium. The claims of truth and authority go hand-in-hand. Symbolic identity markers (such as language, structures, practices, rules and so on) are largely seen as distinguishing Church from world, and are thus held to be of the utmost importance. Within the Church, this understanding of orthodoxy is threatened by internal division and dissent (often said to be induced through infection by the world), which should therefore be prevented or contained.[11]

The second theological response has its starting-point in continuity with the postmodern context. From a socio-cultural and a philosophical perspective, the particularity of the Christian narrative and its claim to truth seems to prevent access to religious truth, rather than mediating or facilitating it. The insecurity brought about by socio-cultural processes affects identity construction, and motivates a suspicion about deep involvement in a specific narrative. The philosophical deconstruction of the Christian truth claim in terms of a more fundamental religious desire, disposition, or relationship induces suspicion of sincere commitment in the Christian tradition. In both cases, the postmodern context does not favour taking Christian truth claims, narratives and practices too seriously, because the latter seem to limit and even to obfuscate what religion is really about. The first theological response, of course, re-inforces such a viewpoint, as it profiles Christian orthodoxy as a counter-cultural narrative by strengthening its very particularity.

From a socio-cultural perspective, coping with the assignment of religious identity construction (and its insecurity) in continuity with the context has resulted in the development of a broad, vague religiosity, or search for spirituality, that does away with certain specific Christian beliefs, and is open to alternative expressions. In the foregoing, I referred to this religious phenomenon as 'something-ism': the expression of a religious longing that 'there is something more' to life than whatever is maintained by scientific and pragmatic world-views, with a simultaneous inability or unwillingness to say anything else about what this 'more' might be about.[12] In philosophical circles, thinkers such as Caputo and Kearney (and, in his own way, G. Vattimo) have deconstructed Christian faith claims in order to safeguard the radical nature of religious desire, of 'pure religion'. Here, the 'messianic' must always be distinguished from particular messianisms. In this regard, Christianity's Christological claims are always too confessionally partisan. For both, the very 'narrativity'

of the Christian faith, and the specificity of its truth claims (that is, its particular orthodoxy), hinder an authentic religious disposition. The new orthodoxy they seek goes beyond Christian particularity.

The third and final theological reaction is a response which seeks primarily to deal in a critical-constructive way with the challenge of the contextual 'interruptions' of Christian truth claims (both involving continuity and discontinuity), while adding a corrective to the two former reactions.

The socio-cultural contextual 'interruption' of the self-evident nature of Christian identity construction (including its truth claims) challenges certain presumptions, such as the general plausibility and generic legitimacy of Christian faith. In the present plural religious context in the West, Christian faith has become one option among many, and being a Christian is, structurally speaking, a choice. Accordingly, when confronted with its truth claim, Christians who do not take into account the freedom and reflexivity involved in this process (freely choosing and being able to reflect about and argue for the choice made), act counter-productively. In this regard, the context 'interrupts' not only the classical/self-evident view of orthodoxy, but its more recent counter-cultural perspective. The insecurity involved in identity construction should not prevent any such construction, resulting in nihilism or relativism (because not choosing is also a choice). It should be clear, however, that Christian faith entails a conscious involvement that requires initiation into the particularity of its tradition, narratives, doctrines and practices. It is not by denying or suppressing the insecurity of the process that Christian identity construction copes with it effectively. On the contrary, it does so by fostering a reflexive appropriation of Christian faith. That appropriation is aware of the particular nature of choosing, and the fact that it is not self-evident, and is not paralyzed by the process. All this gives rise to a self-critical impetus that does not allow for overly confident and unquestioned truth claims. Christian faith is never acquired as such, but must always be re-appropriated. Orthodoxy is not an automatic possession but has to be continuously re-engaged with. The socio-cultural 'interruption' of Christian truth claims instigates a sincere reflexive engagement of Christian tradition, and 'interrupts' the paralyzing effects of the ensuing insecurity (relativism banishing all truth), as well as counter-cultural theological responses to it (claiming truth and security against the context). Being a Christian means definitely opting for a specific tradition (against something-ism), but not

closing oneself off, and within the borders of that tradition (against the counter-cultural reaction). Continuity and discontinuity between faith and context are combined here. Orthodoxy is not a closed set of doctrines and practices, to be held to or withdrawn from, but involves opening ourselves to the truth of a tradition and its identity-constructing capacity, without absolutizing or encompassing that truth.

Discussion of the philosophical 'interruption' of Christian truth claims may help to clarify this last statement. The claim that language contaminates a more original religious structure, and should be set aside in order to contemplate religious desire or engage in a relationship with what is beyond language, challenges Christian orthodoxy to think about the nature of its particularity (narratives, doctrine and practices). Surely, from this perspective, particular truth claims that are held as absolute or are already in possession, and that isolate themselves from the challenge of 'interruption', are a hindrance to more adequate ways of dealing with religious truth. From a theological perspective, however, it is questionable whether language is to be understood solely as contamination. Within a dynamics of incarnation, it is possible to argue that particularity, history and language are not impediments to religious truth, but the ways in which it is mediated to us and we deal with it in faith. Language is not to be considered primarily as contamination but as the condition of religious truth. The quest for religious truth does not lead 'beyond', let alone 'behind', language, but to language itself. It guides us to the specific stories, practices, texts and traditions in which religious truth is lived and experienced. Only there can we find the ground and content of religious truth claims. In Christianity, this insight is radicalized through the concepts of kenosis and incarnation, and ultimately in the preferential option for the poor and the marginalized. God reveals Godself not only in actual histories and narratives but especially in histories and narratives of suffering, and the dangerous memory of suffering, cross and resurrection are at the heart of a Christian hermeneutics. In this latter perspective, language as such is not the problem, but a failure to heed the one who is not allowed to speak.

Christian negative theology does not lead to an evacuation of language, meaning and content but bears witness to their saturation. In a Christian theological perspective, we do not have to choose between narrative and particularity, or openness and the beyond of language. An open Christian narrative is the way to deal with theological truth, without mastering

or dismissing it.[13] Here again the contextual 'interruption' of theology is accompanied by a theological 'interruption' of the (philosophical) context.

IV Conclusion: orthodoxy and Christian truth-claims

Orthodoxy concerns the question of how to understand the Christian truth claim adequately in relation to the current, 'postmodern' context. I have argued that a critical–constructive response to the structural insecurity of Christian identity construction, and to the philosophical criticism of the particularity of Christian truth claims, is preferable to responses that favour either strict opposition and discontinuity, or mere adaptation and continuity. Critically engaging with the socio-cultural and philosophical 'interruption' of orthodoxy qualifies the truth claims which it proposes, and simultaneously 'interrupts' the unquestioned presumptions or consequences of these contextual 'interruptions'. Christian truth claims are not only 'interrupted' but 'interrupt'.

Notes

1. I have dealt with this question elsewhere. At appropriate points, I refer to some of my publications in this regard.
2. See L. Boeve, *Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe*, in M. Hoelzl & G. Ward (eds), *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics*, London & New York, 2008, pp. 187–209.
3. *Cf.* P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularisation of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, 1999.
4. A good definition of ontotheology can be found in J. Schrijvers, 'Ontotheological Turnings? Marion, Lacoste and Levinas on the Decentring of the Subject', *Modern Theology* 22 (2006), pp. 221–53.
5. See J. Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas,' in J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, 1967, pp. 117–228 (tr. *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, 1972).
6. *Cf.* J.-F. Lyotard, *Le différend*, Paris, 1983 (tr. *The Differend: Phases in Dispute*, Manchester, 1988).
7. For the argument behind this paragraph, and for further references, see L. Boeve, 'Theological Truth in the Context of Contemporary Continental Thought: The Turn to Religion and the Contamination of Language', in F. Depoortere & M. Lambkin (eds), *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives*, Amsterdam, 2012, pp. 77–100.
8. *Cf.* J. Milbank, C. Pickstock & G. Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London & New York, 1999; J. Milbank, 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', in L. P. Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, Aldershot, 2000, pp. 33–45; J. K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology*, Grand Rapids, 2004.
9. *Cf.* J. Ratzinger, 'Europe in the Crisis of Cultures', *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (2005), pp. 345–56.
10. For a discussion of this point, see L. Boeve, 'Retrieving Augustine Today: Between Neo-Augustianist Essentialism and Radical Hermeneutics?', in L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts & M. Wisse (eds), *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?*, Leuven, 2009, pp. 1–17.
11. In another context, I argue that, precisely because the Church closed in on itself to protect itself from a world perceived as inimical, the Church forgot that it was in need of conversion itself, before it could call on the world to convert. *Cf.* L. Boeve, 'Conversion and Cognitive Dissonance: An Evaluation of the Theological–Ecclesial Program of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI', accepted for future publication in *Horizons* 41 (2014).
12. See for further references, L. Boeve, '"I believe that there is "something more"! Religious Revival and Negative Theology', in *Id.*, *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York & London, 2007.
13. I develop this insight in the context of a theological dialogue with Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern philosophy in L. Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, London & New York, 2014.